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AUTHOR Moen, Mary
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ABSTRACT

Four reasons why a media course is valuable to students are: (1) mass communication is an important part of their present and their future; (2) students need to know to what degree the media affect and reflect their sense of morality, political decisions, buying habits, and general way of life; (3) students need to know what opportunities and responsibilities they have in shaping the media; and (4) students need a creative learning experience in studying about the media. Keeping these goals in mind, there are a number of "mini-activities" the media teacher can use that revolve around a study of advertising, radio today, early radio, television programing content and criteria, broadcast news, the effects of television upon its audience, and the future of telecommunications. Such activities include having students find an article about the media and writing two paragraphs about it; having students watch a newscast and taking notes on the order of stories, the amount of time given each story, and so forth; having students write and tape a 30-second radio commercial for a specific target audience; having students analyze television programing; and having students write to someone in the media. Through such activities, students can come to realize the enormous power for good and evil that has been given to the electronic world of the media. (HOD)

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# CREATING TEACHING IN THE MEDIA CLASSROOM

Mary Moen

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# CREATING TEACHING IN THE MEDIA CLASSROOM

Mary Moen

Weaver Award winner Mary Moen wrote "As a teacher of Communication, I feel that I should show my loyalty, interest, and spirit in whatever school I have taught." Her resume shows she has been indefatigable in doing just that.

Educated at U.W. Madison, B.S. (1950) and M.A. (1977), Mary has taught at Rockford (Ill.) West High School (1950-1951); Arena (Wis.) High School (1953-1954); St. Raphael's and Blessed Sacrament, Madison, (1954-1956); Lodi Junior High (1963-1964); Central High School, Madison, (1961-1969); and West High School, Madison, starting in 1969.

Mary has directed plays, forensics, and co-authored with Roger Herian, A Resource Curriculum in Broadcast Media, published by the D.P.I. in 1978.

In order to justify a course in broadcast media when the hue and cry has been "back to the basics," one must demonstrate that an understanding of the media is basic to contemporary life. Therefore, the primary focus of my media course is to prepare the student to become a knowledgeable and critical consumer of the media.

With this concern in mind I present four objectives at the beginning of the course, four reasons why I feel the course will be valuable to my students:

First - Mass communication is an important part of their present and their future. Studies have shown that the average high school student has spent more time with mass media than any other activity except sleep. Therefore, students need some understanding of what the media are and how they function.[2,3]

Second - Students need to know to what degree the media affect and reflect their sense of morality, political decisions, buying habits, and general way of life.

Third - Students need to know what opportunities and responsibilities they have in shaping the media. If they are not happy with the direction media have taken, what can they do and what should they do about it?[4]

Fourth - Students need a creative learning experience in studying about the media. Through "hands on" exercises in creating mini-examples of media messages, students gain a working knowledge and an appreciation of what the media are all about.[5]

Keeping these goals in mind, I would like to share some of the activities I use in my classroom, and reflect on why I feel these activities work well.

During the first week I talk about definitions of intra-, inter-, and mass communication; functions of the mass communicators; problems unique to mass communication; and characteristics of the sender, message and audience in mass communication. In the first week, I try to help them see that they know more than they realize about media. First I use a true-false and short answer test, covering things they will learn throughout the semester. This is done in pairs or threesomes so they can get acquainted with each other. We talk over the answers and take time with those questions which are of particular interest to them. This quiz provides the students with an overview of the course and gives me an indication of students interest and knowledge. The students enjoy showing off whatever knowledge they have about media and discussing possible answers with each other.

As a first writing assignment, students are told to find an article about the media, and write two paragraphs about the article. One paragraph is a summary of the article. The second paragraph presents their reaction to the writer's ideas. They hand the article in with their paper. I collect and grade these papers at the end of the first week and hand them back right away. We then form a circle and the students take turns telling what they read and how they felt about it. This assignment provides a great springboard for conversation about what is new in the media. It is also a fairly non-threatening way for students to become comfortable with each other and with me. When there is time later in the semester, I repeat this assignment.

The students' favorite activity in week one is "show and tell" day. I talk about the mini-productions they will be doing related to early radio, radio advertising, TV public service announcements, and final production, or as I preview the assignments, I play and show top examples which former classes have produced. I challenge them to make something good that I'll have to replace current examples with <u>their</u> work for future classes. Students are inspired by the finished productions of former students and are eager to organize the background knowledge necessary for production.

After the introductory first week, I spend several weeks on advertising, radio today, early radio, television programming content and criteria, broadcast news, the effects of the television upon its audience, and the future of telecommunications. A few of the mini-activities I use during this period of time follow:

1. I use several activities to teach ways in which media can affect society. For instance, I teach propaganda devices and we analyze the devices used in current political radio and television ads. In a political year examples abound, and as future voters the students sense the need not to be affected by the charismatic and emotional manipulation used by candidates. Students also respond

with animation to a study of some of the common claims and appeals used in advertising. They are ad-wise, and delight in analyzing ads with which they are familiar. A simple activity which works well is to divide the students in pairs and ask them to find ten or fifteen claims and appeals in various magazine ads. I supplement this activity by playing radio and TV ads for them to analyze. They can choose a new product of their own and create original magazine, radio and television ads for their product. Using a set number of ads and appeals. Students tell me that after this unit they never watch ads again without identifying ways in which they are being "taken."

2. Newscasting has a strong impact upon its audience. Therefore, I feel a news unit is invaluable. I first talk about the criteria for news selection and the strengths and drawbacks for an audience in obtaining news from each of the major news sources, newspapers, radio and television. One really successful activity I have used is to tape the coverage of the same night's news by two networks. Students watch both broadcasts taking notes on the order of stories, the amount of time given each story, what stories were covered by each network, and what stories were excluded by one network or another. They also note the form in which stories were presented. Finally, we talk about the charisma of the newscasters, and the necessity for an entertainment element in the presentation of newscasts. Since a majority of students admit television is their major or only source of news, they can really see the power and responsibility given to the television newscasters who must capsulize the world's events into quick headline coverage.

   Another successful activity I have used was to ask the news director of a local radio station to gather the teletype sheets and the local news copy from which he created one mornings news program. Meanwhile, I taped his morning's broadcast for that day and those of two or three other local stations. I made class copies of all the new material he sent me. I divided the class into news teams to perform the following tasks: use the news criteria they have learned to decide what stories where chosen for broadcast that day, and choose the order in which they think the stories were broadcast. Then we play the broadcasts and they can see how different stations handled that morning's news. But most important to them (such as a shortage of teenage jobs) were not considered important in the larger world. An interesting follow-up to this assignment is to have the news director come to the class and answer questions concerning his choice of stories.

3. One can not talk about the effect of television upon society without discussing what role it plays with children. The film called "But First This Message," is an excellent film to view and discuss. It examines Saturday morning programming, and talks about the lack of creativity and artistry in children's cartoons.

It also shows examples of television cartoon violence and children's reaction to it. The film also attacks children's advertising (accusing the advertisers of asking children to be the salesmen), and examines children's feelings of failure when a poorly constructed toy falls apart or fails to live up to its TV "hype." Students idenify with the film since they have watched years of Saturday cartoons themselves. I also tape examples of current sit-comms for the class to analyze how even these simplistic TV offerings attempt to give lessons in attitudes and family living.

Following the "effects" unit we turn our attention to production itself. The first production activity I use is to have students write and tape a thirty second radio commercial for a specific target audience. This unit starts with a day in which they learn the basic techniques for good vocal quality and produce a variety of vocal qualities which they may want to use for their commercials. I have them read a simple ad out loud, such as this one for Goben cars: "Are you in the market for a new car? Goben cars must move out the 82's to make room for the 83's. You can save as never before." They will read it badly, and I tell them so! Then I tell them that if they listen and work with me for an hour, they will be able to read it 1000% better by the end of one class period. First we talk about vocal effectiveness in terms of clarity, volume, rate, and variety of pitch and we practice with the "variety in voices" sheet. Then, using the Goben ad, I show them how to mark a script. Finally, I have the class stand and do the Goben ad again, with enthusiasm! The difference between their first attempt and the last is satisfyingly obvious.

Before the period is over, I set up the next day's activity. I divide the class into groups of six and make each person in a group responsible for reading a few lines from an ad using a different voice quality. They may read the Goben ad or make up a few lines of their own. I encourage them to write a couple of lines for an advertisement which would be enhanced by their particular vocal quality, such as using a pectoral voice to advertise cemetery plots. The next day I write the different vocal qualities on the board and number them. I also demonstrate each quality to refresh their memory. Everyone numbers a sheet of paper according to the number of kids in the group, and as students read their examples, the group tries to decide the vocal quality used. The exercise is valuable in many ways. It gets them up on their feet. It's not too threatening because everyone does it. They perform from the back of the room (behind a screen if possible). It's a good first chance to get them over the fear of using a microphone. It's also a good stimulus for creative work to be done later when they write and tape a radio commercial, and when they study early radio. Lastly, it's a good vehicle to use for interesting and effective speech work.

Here are some instructions I give concerning the writing and taping of the 30 second radio commercial:

1. Write about something you like and know something about.
   If you are a skier, write an ad for a local sporting goods store.

2. Have a particular audience in mind and write for that audience.
3. Be creative in your writing in terms of use of voice, music, and possible sound effects.
4. Use the motivational sequence:[6]
   a. Use an attention getter.
   b. Establish a need.
   c. Use visualization.
   d. Show satisfaction.
   e. Move to action.

After studying how to write an ad, they write a first draft and read it aloud to me. The oral reading allows me to work on voice problems as well as editing and timing the script. After getting my O.K. on the first draft, they are to type or print the ad, using the proper form. We have a quick lesson on how to use a tape recorder, and after a great deal of rehearsal, they should be able to successfully tape their finished product. I have them identify themselves by a taping number, instead of by name to minimize their embarrassment when the ads are playing for the class. After they have finished taping the ad, they hand in the final script, along with a paragraph analyzing the ad in terms of the motivational sequence used and identifying the radio stations and target audience to whom the ad was directed.

On the day we listen to their ads they are to fill out an evaluation for each ad, forcing students to take part in the listening and evaluation process. I always emphasize positive criticism.

The students do well with this activity. They have heard so many ads that the writing comes quite easily, and it's a chance to combine oral and written skills to create a media message. They also learn how much time and creative effort is used for a single thirty seconds of air time. We've written ads for the fiftieth anniversary of our high school, the Great American Smokeout, CPR (cardio-pulminary resuscitation), and against drug and alcohol abuse. We have even had a local radio advertising executive accept some of the students' writing for local business concerns!

Next, we turn our attention to the world of television. I found the following activity helpful as an introduction to television programming. I start with an audio-tape featuring the musical introductions from various television prime-time programs. Even students who claim they don't watch much television are amazed at how many introductions they can recognize. They also find they can recall what is happening visually as the music is played. I call these introductions "TV signatures" and talk about the tremendous time and money spent in producing them. Then I play a few video-taped examples for them to show how the theme music is supposed to set the tone for the show, how the characters and their personalities are introduced through the use of the signature, and how the purpose of entire introduction is to "hook" the audience into watching the show. Their assignment is to watch two or three television prime-time programs, taking careful note of the signatures. They are to write a description of the audio and visual aspects of the signature, and then, after watching the entire program, analyze whether the signature effectively enticed them to watch the program

and presented a truthful indication of the show's content. I use MASH as an example of a show whose signature does not reflect all of the elements, particularly the humor. It's a good show to talk about because the students all have watched it many times and remember it in detail.

The next areas we explore are the forces which influence programming, and the use of programming content and criteria. After the students master these, the assignments which follow work especially well in the fall with the new programming season. They also work in the spring when an analysis of the replacements can be made. I use the fall program review issue of TV Guide to discuss the fall's new programming with them. Some activities I have used with this unit follow. I give the students a handout listing the forces that influence television programming. Drawing upon their own television viewing, they identify at least three television programs which reflect these forces: an early blockbuster movie shown on Sunday night in the fall to establish a fixed audience; Monday night football - used to expand men's target audience for advertising purposes; a new show which was cancelled due to poor ratings. Students can also be asked to determine the elements in today's programming that imply the immaturity of television audiences. They will discover such elements as insignificant content, easily identified heroes and villains, simplistic stories, and standardized presentation for viewer security. In addition, I ask students to analyze one new television show in terms of its target audience, its content elements, and its programming placement.[6]

When we have finished dealing with today's media, with which they are very familiar, we move backward in time to study radio history. A brief time is spent introducing the beginnings of radio and why it came about. Then I have had a magnificent old man who once acted in early radio talk to my students about his career in early radio. If you know people who lived in those years, they can tell students about the wonder of those early radio days, and the creative listening is entailed. I play plenty of real examples as well as Bill Cosby's parody called Chicken Heart, a special favorite of mine. I share my own memories too, of listening to a scary story, a romantic play, or a children's delightful adventure. I send an early radio quiz home with them to give to someone over fifty(!) or I give the quizzes to the parents on "Go to School Night." Students hear the fun older people have in recalling their favorite characters and programs, and get a sense of the lasting impact radio made on those fortunate enough to have experienced it.

Then I work with the tape, "How to Write a Radio Play." I may play the tape in its entirety or tell them myself about the use of narration, sound effects, and music in establishing a scene, and the importance of characterization, tagging, bridges, and other basic radio techniques. I then play brief examples of early mysteries, adventures, soaps, children's shows, and westerns. We pay particular attention to the beginning of shows, indicating the use of music and narration to set the particular tone for each show.

Next I have them fill out a form choosing what type of show they'd

like to do. To make sure I have control over their first small group activity, I ask for their first and second choices as to whether they would like to be a director, actor/actress, writer, or a sound effects and music person. I can put strong people in leadership roles, spread weaker people throughout various groups, and avoid the distraction of too many friends in the same group.

The assignment is to write a four to five minute segment of a particular genre, using opening music to set the mood for thier show, a narrator to set the scene, and at least three sound effects, one scene change, and three or four characters. Their segment can begin in the middle of a story or end "up in the air," with a "tune in tomorrow" ending as old radio shows often did. I use a tight time schedule. Every day I set goals for that period, examine their folders and scripts to check on their progress, and give daily group grades. If someone misses class, excused or not, or goofs off during the period, s/he receives a zero for the day. My attendance is almost one hundred per cent during this unit! We present the finished products "live." It saves time and it's much more exciting. However, I do tape them as they are presenting them. I can keep such tapes to play as examples for future classes if they are good enough, and can listen to them at my leisure for grading purposes. (I encourage them to do as many live sound effects as possible.) It's more fun and gives them more control than trying to work with a tape recorder or record.

While listening to the shows, we again use analysis sheets to help them analyze the finished products in terms of clarity of plot, keeping in character, and so on. We take time to discuss each one at length, and also vote for best actor, actress, sound effects person, etc. At the end we have a special awards day. Anyone who received one vote is a nominee. The students love to be the presenters, ala Academy Awards. The awards themselves may be simple pieces of paper or sometimes a talented art student in the class will design them for me. If I have time to tape bits from each program to be played with the awards, it is especially exciting. This unit and the awards day is probably rated the highlight of the course. Students who have never been recognized before may win an award for something. Everyone can feel successful. Students who can write and act receive deserved recognition from their peers, and others not talented in those areas make memorable contributions with the use of music and unusual sound effects. For a short time, students can enter a world which might have been denied them--the exciting world of creativity, wonder, and the magic of sound.

Now that the powerful effects of media have been explored, students must recognize, first and last, that the public has to be the watchdog for the broadcast media. They need to know that groups such as the Action for Children's Television, have been successful in effecting change and they must accept their own role as guardians of the public interest. I spend some time talking to them about how media controls, and is controlled by such groups as the FCC, the broadcasters, and the public.

Creating public service announcements can show students how a good message, representing the public interest, can be communicated. This unit serves also as an introduction to using the television cameras, and teaches students the basic writing tools needed to create something for television. The first day I show the students examples of good public service announcements. I point out the simplicity of the story idea, the use of different camera shots, and the use of music and sound to enhance the commercial. I also instruct them on the use of a story board and a logo. By the end of day one they have divided into groups of five or six, have assigned tasks to each other, and have roughed out a theme for their commercial. This sounds like a lot to do in one period, but it works. They have had the early radio group work before this, and production moves quickly. Again, I use a tight schedule. We have the introductory day, two days for script writing, three days to create video sheets, story boards, logos, and scenery. A camera work-shop day for the two camera persons in each group is held at the same time.

I make daily goals and give daily grades in terms of attendance and work accomplished. We have an evaluation viewing day and an awards day for this unit also. This unit gives them a working knowledge of the techniques and skills needed for video production. Dealing with public service messages rather than poor imitations of current advertising results in higher quality in terms of subject matter and content. As an added incentive, I look for public service events which might consider the use of student work. As mentioned earlier, we have written ads for the fiftieth anniversary of our high school, the Great American Smokeout, CPR and Emergency Services and drug and alcohol abuse education. Writing for the "real world" is always exciting for students and increases a hundred fold both their seriousness in preparation and the quality of their work. So, ask and you shall receive.

An assignment designed to give students a chance to express their feelings is to ask them to write a letter to someone in the media. The purpose of the assignment is to see for themselves whether or not people in the media care enough about their opinion to respond. The students are to write a letter of praise, positive criticism, or query to an ad agency, local radio or television station, newspaper, magazine, or network. Addresses may be obtained from several sources, such as the school or city library, and often local radio or television stations can help. The students write a first copy, I correct it and they hand in the corrected version typed or neatly written in an unsealed, addressed stamped envelope. Than I grade the final copy and mail it myself. They put their home address on them and are very excited if they receive a reply. Students will come back six months or a year after they have had my class and proudly show me the reply they recieved. I always duplicate the pictures or letters students receive so I have these examples to persuade future classes to willingly attack the assignment. From this assignment, they learn that local media people and advertisers anywhere are most anxious to reply, and network "stars" are much less likely to bother. I've had some great exceptions though, including Elvis Presley, Ed Asner, and Carol Burnett. Local advertisers have willingly come to my classes to explain their method of

advertising as a result of student letters of criticism.

Another excellent chance for students to play media watchdogs is writing for the opinion poll sent out by the American Council for Better Broadcasting located in Madison. I send for the surveys in the early fall and students fill out the questionaires. I return them as bulk mail or in person. Students are interested because they have their comments read, talked about, and sometimes quoted in the booklet published each year with the Look-Listen Opinion Poll results. This assignment is fun for the students, easy to do, and another example of a "real-life" activity. What they think and say is noted and counted, and that doesn't happen very often.

I have rattled on and on and have not nearly covered all of the activities in our classroom. One semester is not enough to do a complete survey of media, especially if you intersperse activities to bring the concepts you're teaching to life. I think the mini-activities are what really help students understand and appreciate the work involved in successfully communicating to a mass audience. This course does more than just "teach media." It teaches skills in writing, listening, speaking and small group work. Kids learn to work happily and responsibly together. They discover creativity within themselves. Shy students don a costume and transform themselves into outrageously clever television personalities. So called "average" students delight in creating voices and sound for the magic world of listening. Some gifted and enterprising young people I have had have personally introduced themselves to the guest speakers from the world of radio and television after class or contacted them for advice or work possibilities and have gotten a start towards launching themselves to a future in broadcasting. Last, but not least, the students realize the enormous power for good and evil we have given to the electronic world of the media. I hope they have become more knowledgeable and critical consumers in the process. A media teacher couldn't ask for more than that, now could she?

FOOTNOTES

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2. Earl S. Grow, Jr., "The Study of Radio and Television," in R. R. Allen, S. Clay Wilmington, and Jo Sprague, Speech Communication in the Secondary School, Second Edition (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1976), p. 86.

3. Jeffrey Schrank, Understanding Mass Media (Skikie, Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1975) Introduction.

4. Grow, Op. Cit., p. 87.

5. Grow, Op. Cit., p. 88.

6. Allen H. Monroe and Douglas Ehninger, Principles of Speech Communications, 7th Edition. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1975, p. 243.

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